

Oral History Committee

Mill Valley Public Library

Mill Valley Historical Society

Mill Valley, California

BILL ALBERT THRAN

Born

January 7, 1910 in Bremen, Germany

An Interview Conducted by Bruce Coleman  
on April 22, 1989, in the Mill Valley  
Public Library History Room.

Address

8 Old Mill St

See House File

8 Old Mill

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THIS IS AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH BILL THRAW CONDUCTED BY BRUCE COLEMAN ON APRIL 22, 1983, IN THE HISTORY ROOM, MILL VALLEY LIBRARY.

Bruce: What is your full name Bill?

Bill: Bill Thraw.

Bruce: What's your middle name?

Bill: My middle name is Albert.

Bruce: Albert? And how old are you Bill?

Bill: Seventy-nine.

Bruce: When is your next birthday?

Bill: January 7.

Bruce: Where were you born?

Bill: In Germany.

Bruce: Can you tell us what city or town you were born in?

Bill: I was born in Bremen.

Bruce: Is that a port city?

Bill: That is a port city, yes. Just like San Francisco.

Bruce: Can you tell us what your father and mother did in Bremen? What did your father do?

Bill: Well, my father was working in a gas factory. He was wounded in the first World War and he got a government job in the gas factory. Of course, everything was run by the government.

Bruce: Was your mother a housewife or did she also have a job?

Bill: No, she was a housewife - it was a big job.

Bruce: When did you come to the United States?

Bill: 1930. I was 19 years old.

Bruce: Why did your parents choose to come to the United States? Why didn't they go to Canada or somewhere - Australia?

Bill: It was depression in Germany, and I applied for to come to the U.S. It was the best country to come to.

Bruce: Oh, your parents didn't come. You came alone.

Bill: I came alone. My sister was here and my brother was here.

Bruce: I see. Before you came here, what did you do in Germany?

Bill: I was a machinist.

Bruce: I'd like to ask you some questions about your work experience during your life. Could you tell me chronologically what you did after you were a machinist in your country and then chronologically what you did in the United States in your work experience.

Bill: Well, over there I learned and I was working after I got through learning and the government made a law that everybody who wasn't married would lose their job, so I lost my job--

Bruce: What year was that?

Bill: It was 1928---something like that. And, my mother passed away and my sister came over and visited Germany again. She was over here and we filled out the papers to come over here for me. So I waited two years for the papers and I didn't figure I would come over here anymore. Then, all at once I got the papers and I left just eight days later.

Bruce: Would you continue and tell us about what your first job was in the U.S.

Bill: Well, my first job was - I didn't get the first job I applied for. We had different measurements in Germany and the foreman showed me a micrometer. I could use a micrometer, but I couldn't learn the measurements because we had different measurements over here than we had in Germany. Then I got to work in a tannery. I was a mechanic and it was in San Francisco.

Bruce: Then, what did you do next?

Bill: Then - it was too dirty - so I got a job in a sheet metal shop---sorting, making air conditioners, stuff like that, building things, yes.

Bruce: And then, what was your next job after that?

Bill: My next job was in the Bartola Water Co., heating company. We made water heaters and heating systems in San Francisco.

Bruce: And, after that what did you do?

Bill: Then after that, the company went broke and I didn't have a job and then my sister was over here in Mill Valley, so I moved over here. I got a job in the grocery store. I was working for the Mill Valley Market and after a while, I worked for Purity.

Bruce: What was it like working for a grocery store in those days, Bill? Did they have the fruit out in front of the building? Did they have an old fashioned cash register?

Bill: No. It was more personalized. You know your customers. These days, you don't know anybody anymore. If you go in a grocery store, you don't know your checker. You don't know anybody.

Bruce: You worked for Mill Valley Market. Where was Mill Valley Market located when you worked there?

Bill: Right on Throckmorton near where the laundromat is now.

Bruce: And Purity is over there around the corner. Was that over there where they later had Safeway? (Purity was where Banana Republic is now.)

Bill: No. Safeway was right on the corner where they got the saloon now... on Bernard St., that's where Safeway was. It was where O'Leary's is now.

Bruce: And then after you worked for Mill Valley Market...

Bill: No. I got a letter from the unemployment. They wanted to see me and the WAR broke out at that time and while I had a job and I didn't know what he wanted, so I went down there and they said: "Well, we got two choices for you. You can go in the Army or you can go in the shipyard - Marinship Yard." So, finally he said, "Well we don't want you in the Army. We want you in the shipyard." I was a machinist, that's why.

Bruce: So your next job -- this was World War II, right -- you were in the shipyard at Marinship?

Bill: Yes, that's right.

Bruce: And were you there for the whole length of time until the war was over?

Bill: I was there from the first ship they built, until the last ship was built.

Bruce: That's very interesting, and you worked as a machinist on the ships?

Bill: I guess I was the first one on the base to get hired, I think. I'm not sure, because nobody knew what was going on.

Bruce: Did you commute back and forth by car?

Bill: By train.

Bruce: You went to work from Mill Valley to Marinship in Sausalito by train. Well then, after the WAR was over then what did you do for a job? (No, trains were discontinued before the War started. He would have commuted on the Greyhound Bus.)

Bill: Then I got into the store here.

Bruce: Then you started your own store which was called...what was the name?

Bill: Old Mill Market.

Bruce: Old Mill Market - yes. What was it like running a store initially, when you first started? How was it?

Bill: Well, it was more personalized and people called up and said, "When my husband comes in tonight, give him bread, milk"....or whatever it was and they picked it up and it was charged.

Bruce: Oh, and they charged it. I want to make that clear. As I understand it, the wives would sometimes call the store in the mornings and say, "My husband will be coming in tonight when he comes home from work and please get this ready for him so that he can bring this food home", and oftentimes the people who did this charged the food, is that correct?

Bill: That is correct.

Bruce: Good. Thanks. That's very interesting. Did they call that a "MOM & POP" Store? That's what some people do in San Francisco. They call a small store a ....

Bill: A neighborhood store.

Bruce: And, what were your hours when you worked in the store?

Bill: I worked from 8 AM until 7 o'clock at night.

Bruce: And how did Minna, your late wife with seven children, find time to help run the store?

Bill: She really didn't help in the store because she had arthritis and couldn't handle the cash register. She didn't help very much, she had enough work at home with the children.

Bruce: Did she ever make sandwiches for the Old Mill School kids, who would sometimes buy sandwiches?

Bill: I made the sandwiches.

Bruce: Oh, you made the sandwiches. O.K. And where did you live when you had the store down here?

Bill: On Old Mill Street...this same house.

Bruce: I see, with the whole family. Was that originally called the Little Parish House, for the church, or....

Bill: No. They tore that down. That was on the church property.

Bruce: Oh, there was a Parish House but it was torn down.

Bill: It was torn down when they built a new church over here.

Bruce: What was the store before you moved in? I think it was another kind of a store, you told me.

Bill: Well, I understand, a long time ago, it was to be a bakery. People came over here on weekends or on vacation and stayed here and I guess the bakery just baked on weekends or something like that. I'm not sure. Just for the people who came over here.

Bruce: And they'd stop before they went hiking to buy bakery goods.

Bill: I guess so.

Bruce: Do you remember what the bakery was called?

Bill: I don't know. Mrs. Borgwardt - she gave me that information. She lived in San Francisco and had a summer home over here and when the earthquake hit, her house burned or broke down or something and they moved over here and stayed.

Bruce: Isn't she the sister of Henry Faustine? Mrs. Borgwardt?

Bill: That I don't know.

Bruce: Approximately how many years did you and your wife run the store?

Bill: Oh, I would say about 10 or 15 years; something like that. I'm not quite sure exactly.

Bruce: And I understand that you closed the store sometime in the sixties. Do you remember approximately what year you stopped the grocery store?

Bill: Oh, about twenty years ago, I would say.

Bruce: Around 1969.

Bill: Yes.

Bruce: And can you tell me why did you close the market?

Bill: Well, it's just like anything else; small farms, small stores, they get beat out by the big companies and the wholesalers work the same way. They didn't want the small businesses anymore. I could order ten cases first--when I got it, they come with 50 cases at one crack; 100 cases - 300 cases and I couldn't afford it anymore. It was too much.

Bruce: So, you decided to close it. Before we leave the store, do I understand that the children from Old Mill School came in to buy candy?

Bill: Oh, they bought candy and something to drink or they bought a sandwich.

Bruce: Can you remember, Bill, the names of the candies, like tootsie roll or something like that that they used to have that the kids used to buy or that they especially liked. Can you remember anything like that?

Bill: Milky Way, M&M's, Hershey Bars, Nestle's Candy Bars.

Bruce: Yes, I guess a lot of the names are the same or similar. What about the drinks - did they buy Cokes in bottles or cans?

Bill: Most of the time we had bottles - return bottles.

Bruce: Can you remember how much the return was--a penny or two pennies or a nickel?

Bill: I think it was a nickel.

Bruce: And, can you remember some of the names of the drinks that the kids liked: For example, was it Coke or Pepsi, or it might have been a different name?

Bill: Oh, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Royal Crown Cola, something like that....or Seven Up.

Bruce: So then, is it correct that after you closed the grocery store, you then opened up a fixit shop?

Bill: That's right.

Bruce: And is that called Bill's, or what's the name?

Bill: Bill's Fixit Shop.

Bruce: And, you're still running the shop aren't you?

Bill: Yes, so far.

Bruce: Do your children, your boys or daughter -- you have six boys and one daughter?

Bill: No, I got 3 daughters and 4 sons.

Bruce: Did your children ever help you in the shop with some of the jobs?

Bill: Well, when you get old, you have to depend more on somebody else. I don't drive the car anymore. I don't feel safe to drive. I have to depend on somebody else to go get my material or something like that or to help me in the shop here.

Bruce: Do you have any facility for doing welding in this shop?

Bill: Yes.

Bruce: Tell me a couple of other things that you do besides. I know you repair lamps. Do you repair anything electronic or....

Bill: Electrical things - lawn mowers, oh---all different things. I remember one time a guy brought me in an old slot machine to be fixed. I never know what I'll get.

Bruce: Were you able to fix the slot machine?

Bill: Oh yes.

Bruce: How much do you charge for fixing a lawn mower?

Bill: It all depends. People come in and they bring a lawn mower that doesn't run. They bring in a vacuum cleaner that doesn't run, and you can't tell people how much because if the motor is burnt out it costs quite a bit more than if it's the switch or a wire, so you just have to take it apart and see where the trouble is; so, I take it apart and if it costs too much money to fix it, I call the people first.

Bruce: Are any of your children in the grocery business or in the fixit shop business for themselves, today?

Bill: Well, my one boy is an automobile mechanic. His name is Robert.

Bruce: Tell me the names of your children.

Bill: Well, there is Robert. There's Dennis....

Bruce: I know him. What does Dennis do?

Bill: He works for himself - self employed.

Bruce: And who else?

Bill: Joani, Carolyne, Barbie, Henry, and Bill, Jr.

Bruce: How many grandchildren do you have, Bill?

Bill: Don't ask me. I have to count them!! I got a lot. Yes.

Bruce: What was Mill Valley like when you first came here from Germany? Can you remember? Were there any dirt roads or anything that you remember that has now changed? What was it like when you first got here?

Bill: Well, it was much smaller and it was mostly all old buildings and not so many people. You knew your neighbors. You knew more people. Now you don't know your neighbors anymore. If there was something wrong, you could call your neighbors and they would come and help you or call somebody. But these days you don't know whom to call, except to call the Police.

Bruce: Do you have any old pictures of Mill Valley or any old things from Mill Valley?

Bill: Oh yes.

Bruce: Maybe if you do we could, if you don't mind, look at your pictures after we finish this.

Bill: I got some pictures, yes, but I have to look for them. I couldn't get them now.

Bruce: I won't bother you with that. Do you have anything - any objects that are from Old Mill Valley, an old street sign or something like that?

Bill: No, I don't have it but there's a Trail Map on the wall here, but it's covered with shingles. You know, one of these days, when this building gets torn down, you will probably find it.

Bruce: How very interesting! On the outside wall? A Trail Map on the outside wall of this building on Old Mill Street which someday could be opened up and used as a relic or an old memento or whatever!!!

Bill: Yes, that's right. Well, you could see it ...

Bruce: And it is covered by shingles; is it painted?

Bill: It's painted.

Bruce: And could you tell me - I can guess - but you tell me what did they use it for?

Bill: For the hiking trails. People came up here on the train and they stop here - I don't know - for the bakery or something and they didn't know where the trail was and they looked at the map and then they took off.

Bruce: That's very interesting. I'm glad you mentioned that. Would you also tell me approximately the size - how many feet by how many feet the trail map is - can you remember, approximately?

Bill: I would say 8" by 8" - something like that.

Bruce: When did you shingle this, do you remember what year?

Bill: Oh, I believe in the "50's - I'm not quite sure.

Bruce: And, it was on the front corner of the building toward Old Mill Park?

Bill: That's right.

Bruce: O.K. that's good. I'm glad you told me about that. Just a couple more questions. I also want to find out if you are an Episcopalian? You are close to the Episcopal Church here. I was just curious . . . were you or your wife Episcopalian?

Bill: No, I'm not a very religious man. I believe in righteousness, but the churches these days are - I don't know what it is - terrible!!! But you take Ireland, the Protestants fight the Catholics. Jews fight this. The Arab religion fight something else; it's nothing but fighting over religion. I don't believe in it.

Bruce: O.K. I just wondered. I asked you because you are so close to the Church. And now I want to ask you about gardening. Do you have a garden?

Bill: Oh yes. I raise flowers, peas, vegetables, lettuce, corn.

Bruce: Did you learn to garden in Germany?

Bill: Yes, I did. I learned from my parents. We had a garden and I had a little corner for myself and I planted my own garden.

Bruce: You had a corner for yourself. That's wonderful. Did you use what I call a "poke-a-hole" method to prepare a hole to plant corn in Germany? Did they use . . .

Bill: Well, last year it wasn't too good, but no matter what it is, Mother Nature gets the last word. Corn likes it warm. And lettuce does not like it warm; peas don't like it too warm, but corn likes it warm.

Bruce: Do you think this year will be good because of the late rain? In March we had a late rain.

Bill: Over here you never can tell. Like this year, we had a few days of hot weather - we never had it before that hot; then it cooled off again. Even the weathermen can't predict the weather anymore.

Bruce: Have you planted corn yet?

Bill: No, not yet.

Bruce: Do you use a method of planting by the light of the moon?

Bill: No I don't.

Bruce: All right. Thank you. Do you have any philosophy on gardening?

Bill: Yes. If something bothers you and you get upset, get in the yard and dig a little bit and put some seeds in or pull some weeds, I forget all my troubles or whatever upsets me.

Bruce: Wonderful!! Let me ask you about orchids. I understand that one of your specialities in the garden is orchids.

Bill: Well, I like to experience how it grows; what is the best time; what is the best for whatever the plants need.

Bruce: How did you happen to start raising orchids, Bill?

Bill: Well, my neighbors had some orchids, and they moved and they gave me some plants and I started with those; I got more and I exchanged with other people and I got more and more.

Bruce: I wanted to ask you about -- I understand that you have a well; and when did you put in the well?

Bill: Well, when we had the last drought -- in the 70's -- late 70's -- 78 or 79, something like that -- two years it was.

Bruce: And you looked into having a well drilled?

Bill: That's right.

Bruce: How deep is your well?

Bill: The well is 20 feet deep.

Bruce: Is it a good provider of water?

Bill: I would like to have more, but it slows down in the summertime if we get a late rain. I got enough water but if we don't get any late rain, then I have to slow it down.

Bruce: Are there many people around you here that also have a well? You are the only person I know in Mill Valley who has a well.

Bill: I don't think so.

Bruce: Well, besides gardening, do you have any other activities that you like to do, such as watching sports, reading, or smoking?

Bill: No, I don't watch sports too much because, to me, it's not a sport anymore; it's a business - most of it. I like to see the kids go into a sport.

Bruce: You enjoy smoking?

Bill: Yes. It's a habit I got and it's the only bad habit I have - I hope.

Bruce: Is there anything else that you can remember about old Mill Valley or changes in Mill Valley that you'd like to put on the tape? I have these questions, but you may have other things you'd like to say that is aside from this.

Bill: Well, there is a lot of things you learn through the experiences; you learn through the kids. I remember one time a boy came in here and he says, "I've got a birthday and I'm gonna treat my friends and I got a big dollar." So, I thought it was real and he bought some candy and something else - I've forgotten now what it all was; but when it came to paying, he had a ten dollar bill. Then I saw there was something wrong. So I gave him the change for a dollar and he left. I called his mother and she said, "Wait a minute let me check my pocketbook." She came back and said "That stinker! He took a ten dollar bill!" So I told her, well he came in the shop and I gave him less than the money - nine dollars. So the kids all try to put something over on you. Sometimes intentionally - sometimes not.

Bruce: How do you feel about the world today? Would you care to make any comment on the world situation--just to sorta compare it to when you were younger?

Bill: The world situation is getting worse and worse. I remember my father; he was in the first World War and he got wounded and he came back and said "We can't have another war. Look at all these gases we got now. We can kill the whole world with the gases they got now." And you look at it now - you got ten times more powerful chemicals than what we used to have and that has to stop.

Bruce: Do you remember, Bill, if, when you first came here, they used to have four stop signs on this corner?

Bill: They never had a stop sign here when I first came. They had a garage over here by the school and the people were complaining that the kids were playing in the little outside in the rain and they wanted to build a shelter for the kids so they would go to the shelter, but when the first rains came, the kids didn't stay in the shelter; they played in the gutter outside - outside in the gutter - instead of in the shelter.

Bruce: Another question: do you remember about Old Mill School and the area there - do you remember a spring. I think it's called a sulphur spring; coming out of the ground in the play yard - which now is the play yard?? Could you just tell a little

bit about that? Where did the water go? Was it a sulphur spring? Was that here when you first came? Tell me about it -- did it bubble up?

Bill: That's what I understand. It was a sulphur spring. I'm not sure about that. Well, in the summertime when the ground would have been down, you couldn't see it but in the wintertime when it started to rain, the ground couldn't take all that water and it came up.

Bruce: Where did it drain off? Just straight across to the street?

Bill: Oh, right underneath the ground. That's where I got my water -- from the well.

Bruce: Oh, really!! That's interesting. And then after a while, after you lived here -- after some years when you lived here -- they capped it; they covered it up.

Bill: Well, they put asphalt over it and they put drains in there.

Bruce: Do you remember any characters from Old Mill Valley. There used to be a -- I wasn't here, but I heard about a guy who had a cigar shop down at the Old Depot where the trains came in. Do you remember anybody who was kinda like a character from the old days in Mill Valley?

Bill: Oh yes, I remember. What did they call him -- "Tail Light Andy"?

Bruce: Tell me about him. Why did they call him "Tail Light Andy"?

Bill: Well, at that time everybody was home at night time and we didn't have that many cars and he saw a car coming at night and with his light on, he knew it wasn't anybody from Police; it was somebody else -- and he checked those cars out. They called him "Tail Light Andy".

Bruce: And his first name was Andy?

Bill: I guess so. That's what we called him.

Bruce: Good! Do you remember anybody else? When I first moved here in the 50's there used to be a woman -- used to come over from the City on the bus and she went up on the mountain and she'd collect flowers and she would come down and have her arms full of flowers; flowers in her hair. I can't remember her name.

Bill: Yes. I remember a lot of people, but I can't think..

Bruce: How old did you say you were?? 74?

Bill: 79. The Police knew what was going on. People talked to the Police more. They were more friendly. These days, you see the Police car passing by and if there is something wrong, then you call the Police and that is quite a difference these days.

Bruce: You know what I think is that one of the things that is so wonderful about you is that you are 79 and you can live at home and you are on your own and you don't have to be in a rest home. How do you feel about that? Do you feel good?

Bill: Well, I think old people like to live in their own home. I remember my Mother - she was in the hospital; She was dying but she wanted to come home and die in her own place. But there are too many old people living on the little pension they make and inflation eats everything up and they can't afford anything anymore. Of course, when I was working in the shipyard, I had a good job, a responsible job and I was making \$1.50 an hour. Who works for \$1.50 an hour anymore? I was lucky to buy this property and pay the taxes; but if something comes up, taxes for this or for that, old people can't afford it and they vote it down because they can't afford it and they don't like to be told there is no hope.

Bruce: And also, I would guess that you enjoy living here in your own home because you have your own garden.

Bill: I got my own garden. I keep busy and if I can repair something, I am proud of it. I work in my yard and if it come out good, I am proud of it. If it doesn't come out, I say well not much loss.

Bruce: Bill, I have no more questions. Is there anything else you would like to say that could go in the History Room of the Mill Valley Public Library?

Bill: Not that I can think of offhand.

Bruce: O.K. I want to thank you very much for giving me your time and we thank you. Bless you.

Bill: I appreciate it. And I hope some of these kids will learn a lesson out of it.

End of Tape.

Transcribed by Grace Lary in April 1991.  
Re-typed June 1994 (previous text lost )